Life on the outside – Article in Driven 03:08

Abstract

The archetypal Aussie backyard was once a sprawling mass of lawn, bordered by a rim of exotic plants and punctuated by a hills hoist. But with garden spaces becoming smaller and water to keep them alive becoming increasingly scarce, there are great changes going on in the Australian suburban garden. Julian Raxworthy tracks this change and seeks to discover what the future holds for the urban garden of tomorrow.

Life on the outside

Australians love their private outdoor spaces. With a climate that encourages as much living outdoors as in and a culture that was built on the suburban residential dream of a quarter acre block and expansive garden, outdoor living for Australians is deemed more of a right than a privilege. But increasingly space and resources are becoming scarce and if you take a look into the suburban plots in any city in Australia you will see a massive change taking place.

Planners pushing for density have forced down the size of new lots to reduce infrastructure costs and enliven suburbs, as land costs have also increased. Density is something of a planning utopia drawn from analysis of European cities, and is generally believed to produce more energetic places as people are forced outside into the public realm. But it's not just because of the lot size that suburban gardens are smaller – it's also because Australian homes have gotten bigger. The McMansion claims as much of the lot for the house as it can. The front garden is taken up by garages and if there is a front garden it's a different beast, for amenity, with fancy finishes or as green lipstick around the enormous residential structure. As the lot left over for garden has decreased in quantity it has also, as a result, changed in quality too. Much of this is due to a change in how the garden is seen in relation to the house. This change is lifestyle.

When we see Australian garden designers such as Jamie Durie talk about 'outdoor living' we are witnessing the emergence in mainstream gardens of a way of living that started in the 1950's and 1960's, largely in California. There, in sunny SoCal, a generation of American landscape architects changed the nature of gardens radically. Educated in a 19th century gardenesque tradition at prestigious Harvard University, these young Americans were dodging their assigned classes and sitting in on the classes taught by expatriate German Bauhaus architects such as Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer. This generation of landscape architects included Dan Kiley, James Rose and Garrett Eckbo, who would design hundreds of gardens throughout San Francisco and southern California that defined the modern garden for the average person as a living room that was outside, rather than a place for the flower hobbyist.

The small spaces in the lifestyle obsessed home are not gardens per se. The garden had traditionally been defined by the activities undertaken in it – gardening. The garden had been as much an activity

as it was a type of place. Its common attributes, garden beds, resulted from the activity of growing flowers, as did the vegetable patch for growing fresh produce, and of course the lawn was as much about mowing. With outdoor living, the garden became 'a space' rather than a series of horticultural endeavours. Barbecues, outdoor dining, and similar activities demanded paved rather than turf spaces, open for flexible living. The garden became the patio, and the activities that had comprised much of the garden, such as sheds, vegetables, cloth-washing and hanging, got screened and banished to 'utility areas', giving over more flat space for objects of pure experience. As these elements have become the garden itself, these have allowed the garden to be less about plants and more about structures. Elements and finishes make up the lifestyle garden, but what about plants? Needless to say that with the desire for an instant garden that can easily be delivered with construction, plants are expected to perform instantly. This has moved the emphasis in gardens from plants that do not surrender their attraction until later, such as trees, or even vegetables for example, to those that look now like they always will, 'sculptural plants'. Sculptural plants are plants that have form, texture or colour characteristics that make them noticeable.

Sydney landscape architect Vladimir Sitta, who runs his own practice Terragram, feels these projects can be done like a formula and he often develops his projects from site-less drawings of elements or spaces that he later gathers together to suit the potential offered by the site or client. Many of these elements are more like sculptures that have been developed to suit certain landscape useages. The Terragram Tindale Garden is situated on Sydney Harbour in the eastern suburbs at the base of a steep slope, amongst rock pools on the water's edge. With the addition of new sandstone to regularise the existing rock walls, a simple space is created, which on one edge accommodates an elaborate timber structure. In terms of the idea of the 'lifestyle garden', this timber element does everything: starting as a vertical wall, it ends up as a deck next to a pool, next to the harbour. Along the way it twists and turns to become a seat, perhaps a table, with the function up to the garden user to determine as they choose to interpret this expressionistic sculpture. In many respects the element is a moment of welcome oddity in a simple, site-specific and understated garden. Like the Sitta project, the Sculthorpe Residence garden by Tim Nicholas Landscape Architects in Melbourne also uses a timber structure to increase the usability of the garden, this time by increasing its size. On top of a building adjacent to the small garden, Nicholas has created a deck that doubles the useable surface of the garden. In a common theme of the landscape garden, the emphasis is on useable outdoor space rather than on plants, with plants occupying edges and gaps in the surfaces.

The lifestyle garden made of few plants and lots of inorganic material suits the biggest issues that has faced the Australian garden: dryness. The lifestyle garden by being mostly hard landscape surface does indirectly deal with this issue, but hasn't yet gone as far as to really engage with dryness as a quality. There have been precedents for how to do this in Australia in the form of the Bush Garden. In the post-war period until the 1970's, Australian garden designers such as Edna Walling substituted native plants into the English garden bed and Gordon Ford and others designed gardens that attempted to mimic the bush as a garden setting. This movement has survived as a subculture that has continued to investigate the potential of native flora in gardens. However while lifestyle has absorbed much of the focus of garden design innovation, the indigenous garden has yet to be fully resurrected as a solution to the water crisis. This is because Australians are perhaps still unable to really see the qualities of dryness that have always been inherent in the landscape as something they too want in their gardens. There is a difference between bountiful beds of native plants and broad patches of dry soil with the occasional plant.

One approach for dealing with this lack of water has been to embrace garden styles from other places, notably the Mediterranean, often using the Tuscan garden as a precedent. These gardens do not embrace dryness per se, but a kind of bountiful duskiness, with beds of lavender and rosemary, and olive trees. While looking to other places with similar bio-climatic conditions is a very valuable way of selecting appropriate plant species, one of the problems with this approach has been that gardeners have simply copied particular details and elements of these gardens to the Australian context stylistically rather than learning and then being innovative with contemporary design. With Mediterranean gardens the tendency is gratuitous terracotta. Another area of reference for coping with dryness has been to look to the American dessert context and other arid regions around the world where succulent plants have adapted to dryness by storing water in thickened leaves and stems, with waxy foliage to reduce evapo-transpiration. The Sculthorpe garden by Nicholas utilises succulents like these.

Some landscape architects and garden designers in Australia are looking to redefine the aesthetic of the Australian garden to embrace the condition of dryness, and one larger garden project is leading the way: the Australian Garden at the Cranbourne Botanic Gardens in Melbourne by Taylor Cullity Lethlean. The garden centres around one large area of red dirt reminiscent of the red centre of Australia, with patches of Spinifex and a fleeting pattern of white gravel. A mound around the edges make the space feel like a broad expanse and so has both the aesthetic as well as the spatial feel of Australia, somehow. Because of this 'vibe' the project has sunk into visitors consciousness as particularly Australian. Whether it is really true to the country or not, it 'feels' somehow appropriate and makes starkness appropriate. Another project by Vladimir Sitta also tries to work with this stark red aesthetic though it is not perhaps so much about an aesthetic of dryness as it is working with characteristics of Sydney. Located near the labyrinth of promontories on middle harbour this garden picks up on the colour red as it appears in seams of rust in sandstone. Seemingly impossible, Sitta has created angled platforms that hang like outcrops over pools of water and thereby remind us of another precedent for working with dryness – the oasis. A predominance of dryness makes the presence of water special, miraculous, and in being miraculous also makes it valuable. Using dryness to value water is in itself a water saving strategy because it changes how we see water. Like Nicholas's garden, Sitta also uses succulent plants on top of the platforms, though when I talk with him recently he complains that the uncharacteristic wetness of the summer in Sydney makes them rot.

All the examples above refer to other places as much as they do Australia, a process that Prof Leon van Schaik from RMIT has described as 'Dim resonance', where Australian designers fine tune and develop concepts that come from elsewhere. This is a valid approach and one made even more ubiquitous because of the nature of global communications. However for garden design it has not always been a good thing as designers have tended to be lazy and copy what they find, making the question 'what is the future of Australian garden design?' a difficult one, but one for which an answer might nonetheless be attempted.

Clearly, from the precedents mentioned above that attempt to find a language of dryness, the future Australian garden will embrace the real bio-climatic nature of its specific environment rather than attempting to unsustainably resist it. It will probably do this with a cosmopolitan blend of plants from similar locales like the American desert, but would also do well to look more to Africa and also the Middle East, and with a much greater native plant component used less self-consciously but

more artificially, not mimicking nature. The emphasis on outdoor living will continue but these spaces will reflect more of the eccentricities of how Australians live outside, which we can see in how elaborate barbecues are becoming. This gives another clue to future directions, by focusing on culture. Rather than being stuck in cultural cringe, the Australian garden could look back to some of the witty and corny aspects of its history, and be unafraid of the kitsch: not gnomes or concrete kangaroos but something like it. Australian humour is very particular and in architecture this is something that has been very productive, particularly in Melbourne. This cultural aspect could be engaged with through a return to gardening, to the process of human growing things over time, which is a kind of intimacy, a kind of friendship. If the Australian garden became more about gardening we might just also become more engaged with natural processes, and by being so discover more about the planet. Considering the very precarious state of the environment such an engagement may be our only hope. I am sure all of us could do with the activity and recreation, as Norm told us in the public advertising campaign in the 1970's: 'Life, be in it'.